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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Sundance Nurtures Lowbrow and High

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PARK CITY, Utah, Jan. 26 - Rarely is the tension between art and industry more naked than it is at the Sundance Film Festival. Now in its 21st year, Sundance has in the past decade managed to muscle its way to the front of an increasingly overcrowded festival landscape to become, for better and sometimes for worse, the most important such event in North America. Sundance is indispensable, unavoidable and all but bulletproof, even when its movies are not.

Geography helps. Less than two hours on a plane and a few hops in a car are all that lie between the movie industry in Los Angeles and this Utah resort. Once a year, this ski town briefly transforms into a very concentrated, by turns unpleasantly frenetic and exhilarating trade show. And because most of the more commercially promising features that don't yet have distribution are now front-loaded into the festival's first few days, the gathering has also become a weekend-getaway affair for industry heavy-hitters on the hunt for the next big thing. The festival officially wraps Sunday, when all the various prizes are doled out by the various juries, but in a real sense, Sundance was over on Monday.

Although the world premieres continued past the opening weekend, this year Sundance came both to a head and a premature close with the Saturday evening screening of the most hotly anticipated title of the festival, "Hustle & Flow." Written and directed by the newcomer Craig Brewer, the film opened to an audience jammed with executives, including the co-chief operating officer of Viacom, Paramount's parent company, and a healthy sampling of the film's cast and crew, who laughed and cheered to the hip-hop beats and pervasive raunch.

Both "Hustle & Flow" and the industry's desperation to embrace it were best expressed by the disquieting image of one of Paramount's top female executives laughing at one of the film's vulgarisms, which runs along the lines of "Are a pig's genitals pork?," but uglier.

Presented as a touching and uplifting story about a pimp and his ho's, the film is a tissue of clichés that were already exhausted when the Dead End Kids roamed the Warner Brothers back lot in the 1930's. Although it features a strong lead performance from Terrence Howard, similarly compelling in another festival entry, George C. Wolfe's "Lackawanna Blues," "Hustle & Flow" is rubbish. But it is precisely the kind of rubbish movie executives seek at Sundance, hoping that the film's beats, pimp hero and putative exoticism will attract young audiences. For those industry types, Sundance has become a fountain of youth, a place to troll for new talent that can be folded into the mainstream (like the "X-Men" director and Sundance alum Bryan

Singer) and inspire enthusiasm both within its ranks and within the equally youth-obsessed media.

In the last decade, the movie industry has undergone significant changes -- notably with the entrenchment of studio specialty divisions and a surge in accessible digital tools -- which have effectively rendered moot longstanding arguments about independent cinema. The bottom line is that these days, independent film is at once dead and very much alive, ingrained in the movie mainstream and also running free. And just as there are now at least two independent-film movements, so, too, are there now two Sundance festivals: one that caters to the needs of the movie industry, say, by offering numerous world premieres, and one that makes a home for films like William Greaves's engrossing experimental feature "Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 2 1/2," which hew their own course and reaffirm the too-often forgotten point that authentic independent cinema is independent in vision, not just in financing.

During the 1990's, as indie film became a marketable brand for Hollywood -- the fruits are evident in this year's Academy Award nominations -- it often seemed that art was taking a backseat to industry at Sundance. Midway through this year's festival, however, it looks as if Sundance has arrived at a compromise that satisfies the industry and still makes room for more genuinely alternative, less commercially viable productions. Support for the latter is especially crucial, because while independent cinema is thriving, it is not in its efflorescence, and renegade spirits need all the help they can get. There are young directors here slick enough to slide into the studio system, but too few with the guts and the vision to stray from three acts or to offer characters with inner lives, not just arcs.

Still, there were signs of encouragement, including one from Seattle, the setting for Robinson Devor's dreamily poetic "Police Beat," and from Butte, Mont., the location of a formally ambitious fiction-nonfiction hybrid from Travis Wilkerson called "Who Killed Cock Robin?" Both films have a strong sense of place, a kind of site-specific practice that in the wake of the post-Tarantino explosion in genre filmmaking appeared to have largely gone missing in independent cinema.

Mr. Wilkerson's film concerns three friends struggling in a ghost town haunted by the spirits of the radical left. Mr. Devor's film centers on a lovelorn bicycle cop from Senegal who crosses the geography of the human heart as he travels a landscape shaped by crime, both brutal and comic, and all manner of human folly. It's too early to tell whether films like these represent an emergent regionalism, but they suggest that at least some filmmakers have their sights fixed on points beyond Los Angeles and New York.

Sundance's evolving commitment to cinema outside the United States, evident in its establishment of competitions for both foreign dramatic and documentary features, has been equally encouraging. The hope is that this sort of institutional support can help create new audiences for Chinese films like "Yang Ban Xi: The 8 Model Works," an absorbing, shrewdly intelligent documentary from Yan Ting Yuen about the propaganda operas that were the only film stories allowed during the Cultural Revolution. As Ms. Yan makes clear, it can be tough breaking from official thinking, something that observers of American independent cinema know full well.

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